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AUTHOR	Nixon, William A.
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ABSTRACT

In 1800 the U.S. democracy faced a challenge when Republican Thomas Jefferson defeated Federalist President John Adams. The Federalists handed over the reins of power to their hated rivals, setting a precedent that has guided U.S. politics ever since. This precedent established the tradition of the peaceful transfer of power. The bicentennial of Thomas Jefferson's election is an appropriate time to reflect upon this event and its place in the school curriculum. The key concept to teach about the election of 1800 is the crucial role of political parties in the U.S. democratic system. In addition, the election of 1800 should familiarize students with the electoral system and the important leaders and ideas of the first two political parties. The 1800 election offers an excellent opportunity to teach using historic documents. The presentation of the election of 1800 should grow in complexity as students mature. Elementary students should be introduced to the role of political parties, to the process of presidential elections, and to early U.S. leaders (Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton). Middle school and high school students need to know about the extra-constitutional nature of political parties, the electoral system before and after the Twelfth Amendment, the ideology and leadership of the Federalists and the Republicans, and the important issues and events that gave rise to the first two-party system. The Digest suggests using Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address as the primary historical document. Five World Wide Web sites and five references that support the topic are identified. (JEH)

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2805 EAST TENTH STREET • SUITE 120
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47408
812-855-3838 • 800-266-3815

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The Election of 1800: Teaching About a Critical Moment in the History of American Constitutional Democracy

By William A. Nixon

As America approaches its 54th presidential election in 2000, we take it for granted that the candidate who wins that election—no matter how partisan or contested it might be—will become the 43rd President of the United States following a peaceful transfer of power in a familiar ceremony. Indeed, this sense of inevitability is clear evidence of the strength of constitutional democracy in the United States. Aside from the election of 1860, which led to the Civil War, for two centuries America has met the test that a country is an established democracy when it consistently makes peaceful changes of government via free elections (Huntington 1991, 7-9).

But this democratic tradition had to be earned. In 1800 American democracy faced one of its most serious challenges when Republican Thomas Jefferson defeated Federalist President John Adams. World history reveals that in all too many cases, political leaders defeated at the ballot have not honored the voice of the people. But America followed a different course. The Federalists handed over the reins of power to their hated rivals, setting a precedent that has guided American politics ever since.

Do students recognize the peaceable outcome of the election of 1800 as one of the most critical moments in the establishment of constitutional democracy in America? The approaching bicentennial of Thomas Jefferson's election is an appropriate time to reflect upon the central place this momentous event should have in the school curriculum. This Digest connects the election of 1800 to the social studies curriculum, summarizes core content on this key event in American history, proposes the use of historic documents by teachers and students, and recommends World Wide Web sites as sources of documents and related information.

The Election of 1800 in the School Curriculum. The key concept upon which to base treatment of the election of 1800 in the school curriculum is the crucial role of political parties in the functioning of American democracy. Though not part of the original constitutional scheme, parties emerged as an essential means by which Americans peacefully resolve political disputes. In addition, the election of 1800 should be used to familiarize students with the electoral system and to expose them to the important leaders and ideas of the first two political parties. Finally, the election of 1800 offers an excellent opportunity to teach using historic documents.

The place of the election of 1800 in the school curriculum should grow in complexity as students advance in maturity and knowledge. Primary and elementary students should be introduced to the role of political parties, to the process by which presidents are elected, and to such important leaders of the early Republic as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Adams, and Alexander Hamilton. Middle school and high school students can move on to more complex matters, such as the extra-constitutional nature of political parties, the electoral system before and after the Twelfth Amendment, the ideology and leadership of the Federalists and Republicans, and the important issues and events that gave rise to the first two-party system.

Core Content on the Election of 1800. The founding generation earnestly hoped that political parties would not arise in the United States. Parties were feared as dangerous institutions that represented a corrupting self-interest. But in the end, two parties, the Federalists and Republicans, emerged almost in spite of themselves. Though unanticipated by the Constitution, the United States became the first nation to establish truly popular parties.

Parties began to form during Washington's first presidential term. The Federalists coalesced in support of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton's economic programs, and the Republicans rallied in opposition under James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

Political parties continued to develop in the early 1790s, but as long as Washington remained in office a true party system could not emerge. While Washington sided with the Federalists, he was an enormously popular leader who appeared to be above the dirty business of partisan politics, and no one dared to challenge him at the ballot.

All that changed when Washington announced his retirement in 1796. The still primitive national parties now offered competing candidates. Republicans stood united behind a reluctant Jefferson, while the more factious Federalists offered two candidates, Vice President John Adams and Thomas Pinckney. In a close election, Adams carried the vote, but enough Federalist electors refused to vote for Pinckney that Jefferson received the second highest vote count, making him the Vice President under the existing terms of the Constitution.

During the presidency of John Adams, parties became more important than ever. Foreign affairs led to a series of crises that divided Americans, culminating in the undeclared naval war with France. As war fever gripped the young Republic in 1798, the Federalists, claiming national security, pounced on their domestic opposition by passing the notorious Alien and Sedition Acts. These measures, which among other things prohibited criticism of the government by the press, proved to be one of the great blunders in American political history. The people had rallied behind the administration against France, but now the Republicans were able to cast the Federalists as would-be tyrants quashing civil liberties.

William A. Nixon is a doctoral student in history at Indiana University and a project assistant at the Social Studies Development Center of Indiana University.

Meanwhile, Jefferson and Madison influenced Kentucky and Virginia to pass resolutions denouncing the Acts and asserting the right of the states to oppose or nullify unconstitutional laws of the federal government.

As the election of 1800 approached, the nation was in crisis. Jefferson was again the Republican standard bearer. The Federalists were again divided, with Hamilton leading an unsuccessful attempt to dump John Adams. The election was held over the course of May to December 1800, and involved the citizenry only indirectly. In most states, the legislature chose the electors, and much behind-the-scenes wrangling took place.

The Republicans emerged victorious, but then the unexpected happened. Under the Constitution at that time, each elector was to vote for two candidates without specifying who was to be president or vice president. By mistake Jefferson received the same number of votes as his running mate Aaron Burr, deadlocking the electoral college. The election went to the House of Representatives, where each state had one vote. Burr refused to step aside, and the election was deadlocked for almost a week. By the 36th ballot Jefferson was elected. In 1804 the Twelfth Amendment corrected this problem by requiring electors to vote separately for president and vice president.

Thomas Jefferson became the third president in a peaceful transfer of power. In his inaugural address of March 4, 1801, he made a gesture of conciliation to his defeated rivals that set the tone for future party politics in America. The campaign had been bitter, he noted, but now the country must unite. Though the parties disagreed about much, what they shared was more important.

Teaching with Historic Documents. The election of 1800 provides an outstanding opportunity for teachers who want to use historic documents in the classroom as an exciting way to more directly engage students with the past while fostering analytical and interpretive skills. Jefferson's First Inaugural Address is one of the most significant speeches in American history, and offers a unique window into the complex political views of this leading member of the founding generation. Moreover, Jefferson's language in his First Inaugural Address is closer to contemporary usage than that of many other important texts from this era, and because of that the address serves as a good text for introducing students to the political discourse of the early Republic. The full text of the address is available through the Web resources listed below.

World Wide Web Resources for Teaching about the Election of 1800. The following World Wide Web sites are recommended to teachers and students of United States history.

Inaugural Lesson Plan: Thomas Jefferson—the Revolution of 1800. Maintained by PBS Online and created in association with the Presidential Inaugural Committee for 1997, this site is ideal for Web-based teaching of the election of 1800. Content, however, may be too sophisticated for younger students. The site includes historical background, activities, a link to the full text of Jefferson's inaugural speech, and clear guidelines for using this document. *http://www.pbs.org/inaugural97/jefferson.html*

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and the Election of 1800. This educational site, created by Dr. Patrick Novotny of Georgia Southern University, provides a solid overview of the election of 1800. It also includes contemporary political cartoons, an electoral map, and a link to a site on the Alien and Sedition Acts. *http://www2.gasou.edu/psc/pnovotny/1800.html*

Monticello, The Home of Thomas Jefferson. The award-winning official site of Monticello includes "A Day in the Life," "Matters of Fact," lesson plans, and the highly recommended "Ask Thomas Jefferson," designed for K-12 students. *http://www.monticello.org/index.html*

White House Homepage: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. This site offers concise biographies of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Like the other presidential Web biographies assembled by the White House, these provide information on the First Ladies, links to inaugural speeches, and quotations.
http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/glimpse/presidents/html/presidents.html

Thomas Jefferson Papers at the Library of Congress. This site is part of the Library of Congress's outstanding American Memory project. At present, digitized versions of several thousand of Jefferson's papers and letters are available here. Eventually, the complete Jefferson papers will be digitized and accessible at this site.
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mtjhtml/mtjhome.html

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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